

Raised House Bill No. 5485, An Act Concerning the Office of the Victim Advocate

March 19, 2010

Last July 7, I experienced a terrifying ordeal at the hands of my ex-husband. I was one of the lucky ones. I escaped and he is now incarcerated waiting for trial. The OVA stepped into my life at this point and I will always be grateful they did.

Until the OVA contacted me after my kidnapping, no one had ever talked to me about actions my children and I should take to stay safe, although we had been in the system for three years with protective orders in place. No one advised me about creating safety plans, getting emergency phones, finding ways to shield my contact information or other safety measures. Judicial advocates were helpful within the system, but did not and perhaps could not have become involved with us beyond the court appearances, as the OVA has. I was not aware of the many services available through the OVA during those years and wonder now if I had been, might things have gone differently last July?

The OVA serves a diverse and difficult community: crime victims who are in crisis and often dealing with life and death issues. The OVA's focus and attention must be on the victims. To serve them best, sometimes the OVA must intercede on their behalf with other state agencies, or teach the victims how best to deal with the demands of the system. Their services require autonomy and independence. It is inconceivable that the OVA, whose mission is to guide victims through a confusing and at times adversarial system, can function optimally if subjected to oversight by the very agencies it evaluates when advocating for victim's rights. At times the OVA's evaluations and investigations may, while furthering the cause of the victim, conflict with the very same agencies charged with overseeing the OVA. This conflict translates into further stress and trauma for the victim; the last thing the victims needs at that point in their experiences is to be caught between his or her advocates and other state agencies.

In addition to maintaining the OVA as an independent agency, the state should also ensure crime victims are included in the OVA's oversight. As difficult as it can sometimes be for victims to articulate what they're experiencing, they should be part of the process of improving victim's services. Violence and crime have changed their lives. They've lived through it, they've learned from it, often they've learned to survive because of it. They have a lot to offer those who face similar horrors and the people who advocate for them.

OVA is a tremendous resource the state can be proud of and should support and promote. The state should insist the OVA maintains independence and answers only to an advisory group that includes victims and relevant and knowledgeable individuals who are not subject to its investigatory and supervisory duties.

Jane Doe